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ABSTRACT

A total of 271 students in the 2nd, 7th, and 12th grades from the midwest, northeast, and southeast regions of the United States were surveyed. The survey consisted of fact-based questions about the recent events in the Persian Gulf, and questions designed to elicit value judgments about the international role and current leaders of the United States. There were no significant grade, gender or political party affiliation differences in knowledge base, although there was a developmental increase in knowledge with age. Television, school, and other media were more useful sources of information than the family. Developmental differences in moral judgments also were observed between the younger students who emphasized national roles that provide for needs and safety, and the older students who stressed more global, idealistic values. The 7th-graders demonstrated conventional support of the nation's leadership, whereas the 12th-graders were more critical of the current leadership. A cognitive-developmental theory of political awareness, understanding, and value judgment was supported. (Author)

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Cross-National Comparison of Students' Political Awareness and Attitudes

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Running Head: Student Political Awareness and Attitudes

Poster presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Knoxville, Tennessee, March 25-28, 1992. Correspondence may be addressed to the first author, Lyn Boulter, Department of Psychology, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144.

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ABSTRACT

A total of 271 students in second, seventh, and twelfth grades from Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast geographic regions were surveyed. The survey consisted of fact-based questions about the recent events in the Persian Gulf, and questions designed to elicit value judgments about the international role and current leaders of the United States. There were no significant grade, gender or political party affiliation differences in knowledge base, although there was a developmental increase in knowledge with age. Television, school and other media were more useful sources of information than the family. Developmental differences in moral judgments were also observed between the younger students who emphasized National roles that provide for personal needs and safety, and the older students who stressed more global, idealistic values. The seventh graders demonstrated conventional support of the Nation's leadership, whereas the twelfth graders were more critical of the current leadership. A cognitive-developmental theory of political awareness, understanding, and value judgment was supported.

Problem

Studies examining the developmental change of political awareness of young children, and the agents of this change, suggest that the progression is due to both cognitive development and environmental exposure. Discrete, sequential stages in the growth of political awareness, including current national and international political activity, appear evident in several investigations (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1985; Moore, Lare & Wagner, 1985; Targ, 1969). In earlier stages, children have total faith and trust in political figures and perceive government as powerful, competent, benevolent, infallible and protective. With increasing age, as the knowledge and understanding of political activity increases, so does objective, realistic interpretations of this political activity.

The awareness of major political events is also due to the child's interaction with sociocultural factors. The primary socializing agent has traditionally been the family. More recent evidence points to the schools (Hess & Torney, 1967) and the media (Moore, Lare & Wagner, 1985) as the primary sources of children's political knowledge and understanding. Gender differences identified in previous research reflect the impact of environmental influences. Boys demonstrated awareness of political actions earlier than girls, plus they were more tolerant of national conflict than girls

(Hess & Torney, 1967).

Method

The present research concerned (1) student knowledge, understanding and value judgments of current political events; and (2) identification of sources that provide them with the most information about world events. A total of 271 students (130 male, 141 female) in second (N=119), seventh (N=76) and twelfth (N=76) grades were surveyed with computer-based questionnaires on a bulletin board system that spanned Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast geographic regions. Student responses were analyzed according to grade, gender, and political affiliation. The survey consisted of fact-based questions about the recent events in the Persian Gulf, the causes of these events, questions designed to elicit value judgments about the role of the United States in the world, and questions eliciting judgments about the Nation's current political leadership.

Results

Student accuracy on the seven survey questions concerning facts about the political events surrounding the conflict in the Persian Gulf was remarkably high. Chi square analyses were not significant for grade, gender, or political party affiliation. All three grade

levels answered correctly to most of the fact-based questions, although the percentages were higher for the 12th-grade and 7th-grade (94%) than the 2nd-grade (88%) (Figure 1).

The survey questions that did yield significant differences between grade levels and/or political party affiliations were the following:

21. I learn about what is going on in the world from (a) school, (b) television, (c) newspapers, (d) church, (e) my family, (f) the radio, (g) magazines, (h) other.

25. The MOST IMPORTANT role of the United States in the world today is to (a) maintain world peace, (b) provide enough food for the world's needs, (c) save the environment, (d) stop the spread of communism, (e) protect the world's economic systems.

26. I believe that President Bush is (a) not popular and will probably NOT be re-elected in 1992, (b) very popular and will probably BE re-elected in 1992.

Chi square analysis revealed significant grade level differences in the ranking of useful sources of information about world events in Question # 21 ($\chi^2(7, N = 271) = 18.48$, $p < .01$) (Figure 2). All grades selected "television" as their primary source of

information (86%), and "school" as the second most useful source (74%). However, the 7th-grade and 12th-grade students ranked "newspapers" (73%), "radio" (65), and "magazines" (52%) significantly higher than 2nd-grade students. The 7th-graders selected "family" significantly more often (63%) than 2nd-graders (33%) or 12th-graders (40%)..

Significant grade-level differences also emerged concerning students' selection of the most important role of the United States in Question # 25 (Figure 3). Although all grade levels selected "maintain peace" as the most important role, significantly more 12th-graders selected "peace" (84%) than 7th-graders (58%) and 2nd-graders (59%) ($\chi^2(2, N = 271) = 6.64, p < .01$). Subsequent ranking patterns differed significantly by grade ($\chi^2(2, N = 271) = 9.21, p < .01$). The 2nd-grade students ranked "feed the world" and "save the environment" higher than the other grades, whereas the 7th-grade students selected "stop communism" significantly more often than the other two grades.

Student responses to the question concerning President Bush's probable re-election revealed grade-level differences ($\chi^2(2, N = 271) = 7.82, p < .02$) (Figure 4). The prediction of Bush's re-election by the 7th-grade (89%) was significantly higher than the 12th grade (79%) and the 2nd-grade (71%). Further analysis

of this question also indicated a significant difference between political party affiliations in the prediction of Bush's re-election ($\chi^2(1, N = 271) = 4.73, p < .05$) (Figure 5). Significantly more students affiliated with the Republican Party predicted Bush's re-election (89%) than students affiliated with the Democratic Party (78%) or students with no specific political party affiliation (Independent; None) (79%).

Discussion

A cognitive-developmental theory of political awareness, understanding and value judgment is supported by the results of this study. The 2nd-grade students were very attentive to televised information, a remarkable 41% read newspapers, and they were well-informed by classroom teachers. Nevertheless, they retained less information than 7th-grade students and 12th-grade students due to the abstract nature of political events. The grade-level differences were not significant, but the trend of increased knowledge and understanding with age verifies that at least concrete operational thought is necessary to understand and maintain long-term retention of facts related to United States and world politics.

The 2nd-grade students also revealed a preconventional pattern of value judgments by

emphasizing concrete roles for their Nation that meet basic (personal) needs such as food, health, and safety. The 7th grade students expressed predictably conventional values by selecting the roles of "peacemaker" (i.e., to do "right") and "stopping Communism" (i.e., those who do "wrong") for the United States. The 12th-grade students' almost exclusive emphasis on "peace", and abstract idealism, suggests a postconventional perspective that the mission of the United States should be to establish or maintain life, freedom, and international cooperation.

The increase in political objectivity and critical evaluation of authority with increased age, knowledge, and understanding described by earlier studies (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1985; Moore, Lare & Wagner, 1985) is only partially supported by this research. The 7th-graders were intensely trustful and supportive of their President, which is consistent with the conventional level of moral judgments. The marked drop in support of the President by the 12th-graders reflects an increased awareness that world events, including war, are linked to the decisions of the political leaders in the United States. Also, due to their increased awareness of their own values and ideals, and their ability to make more mature moral decisions, they are more prone to view political leaders as mere humans who are capable of making decisions that may not be in the

best interests of the Nation or the world. It makes sense that these 12th-grade students, who expressed such an intense belief that the mission of the United States is to maintain world peace, would reveal their disappointment in the Nation's pro-war position through a lack of support for President Bush's continued leadership.

The significant difference in support of the present political administration among the politically affiliated and non-affiliated students suggests a National trend away from the dominant political party power structure. It is logical that Republican students are highly supportive of President Bush and Democratic students indicate lack of support. The fact that a significantly large number of non-affiliated students also state a lack of support for President Bush may be predictive of the non-party-affiliated popular vote during the 1992 election.

Finally, the evidence that the females in this study are as highly informed about world events as the males suggests that males no longer dominate political awareness, knowledge, understanding or criticism. Females in the 90's are as attentive to world events, interested in political activity, and politically opinionated and judgmental as males.

Additional analyses of the survey data will involve comparison of knowledge base and value judgments between geographic regions across gender and grade.

Political party and grade-level subgroups within geographical region will also be compared for possible differences in knowledge base or values.

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Moore, S.W., Lare, J. & Wagner, K.A. (1985). The child's political world: A longitudinal perspective. New York: Prager.

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Figure 1. Knowledge of facts about Persian Gulf war as a function of grade.

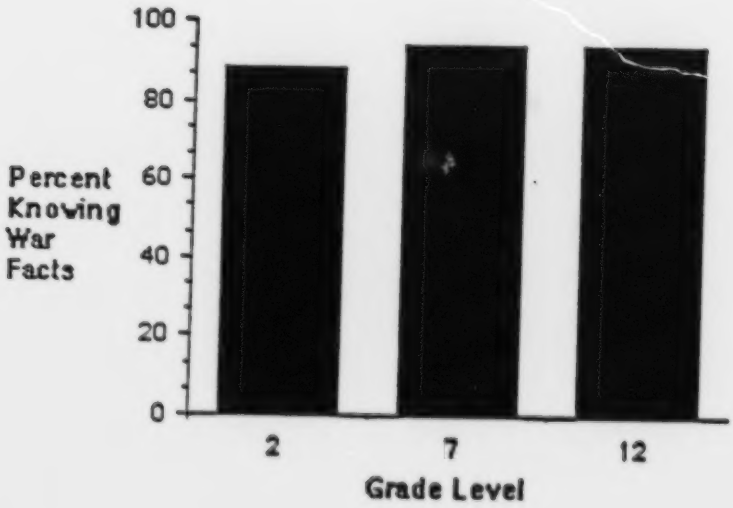

Figure 2. Sources of knowledge about world events as a function of grade.

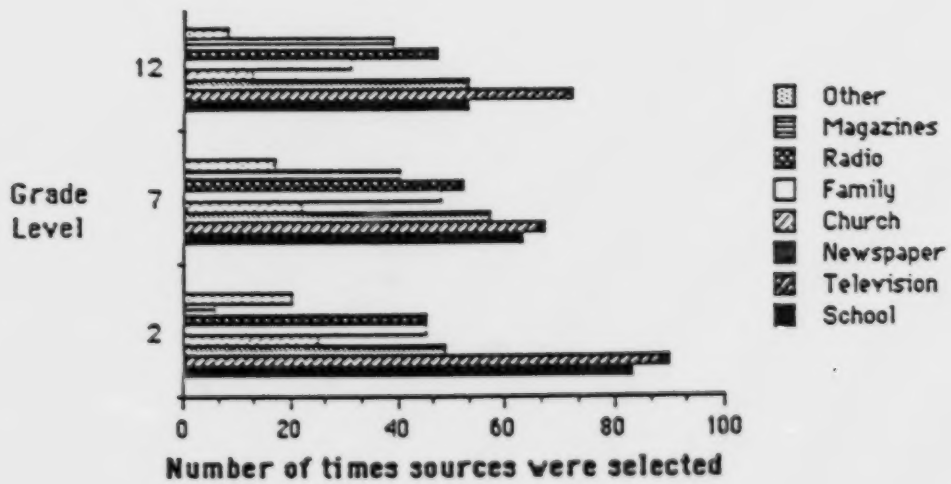

Figure 3. Selection of the most important role of the U.S. in the world as a function of grade.

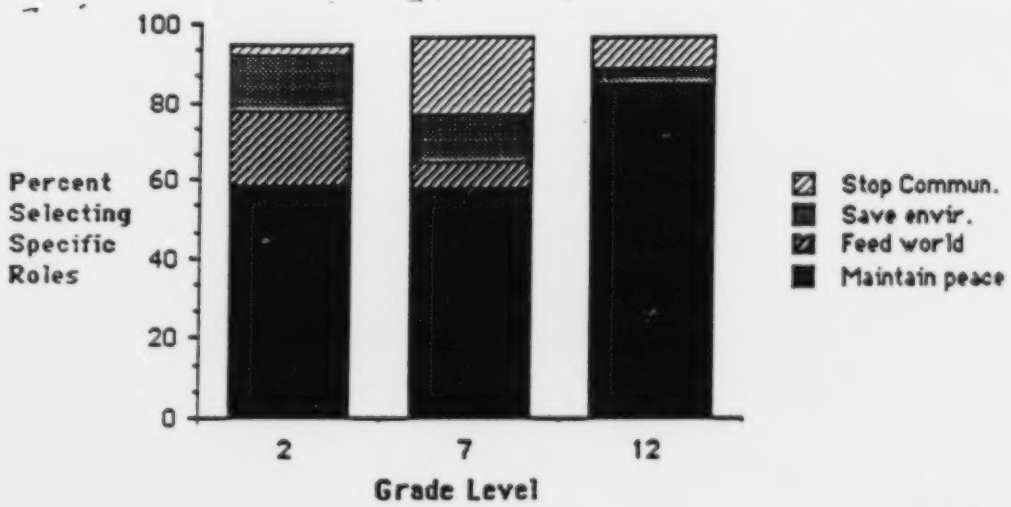

Figure 4. Percent predicting re-election of Bush as a function of grade.

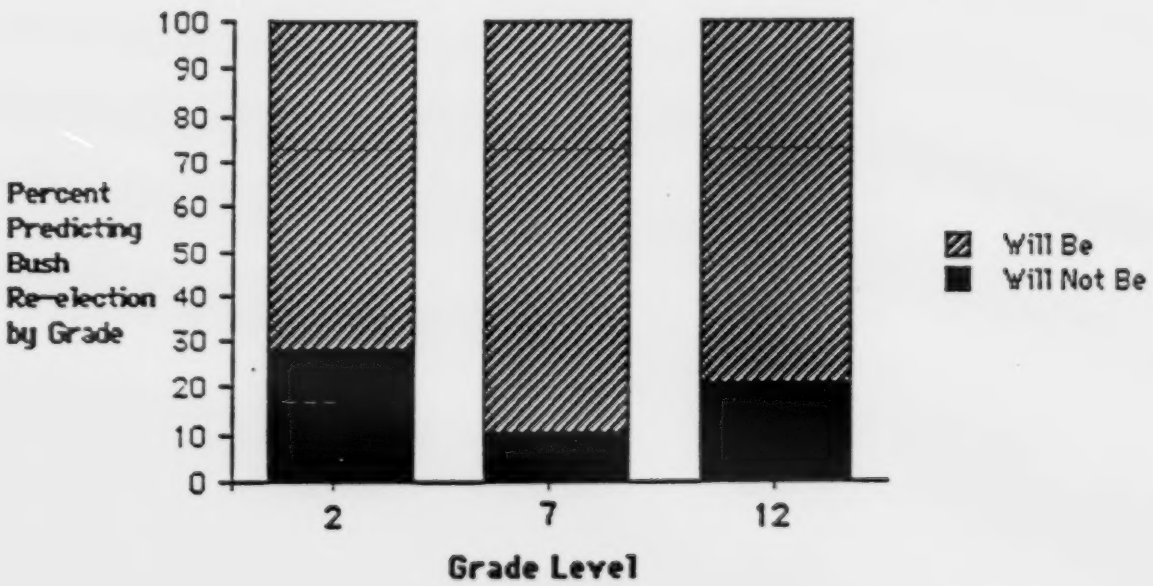

Figure 5. Percent predicting re-election of Bush as a function of party affiliation.